**In *The Crucible*, characters are clearly divided into heroes and villains. Discuss.**

Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* portrays characters as not only heroic and villainous but also plain human. Salem, a Puritan community in the 1600s, is thrown into chaos after a group of girls led by Abigail Williams are found dancing in the heathen forest and thought to have been conjuring the devil. Mass hysteria breaks loose and a game of name and shame leads to innocent people being condemned to death. Through the events that unfold, the reader meets those in the Salem community who are principled and true at heart. We also are witness to how such a situation can provoke people to be motivated by lust, revenge and greed. However, the play also asks the reader to consider the actions of people who are neither heroic nor villainous but simply human.

The real heroes of the play are Elizabeth Proctor, Giles Corey and Rebecca Nurse. These characters are willing to face imprisonment, humiliation, torture and death rather than lie or condemn others. Elizabeth is a ‘covenanted Christian woman’ (64), who ‘will never life’ (86) and who suffers months of imprisonment, while pregnant, rather than confess herself a witch and be pardoned. Similarly, Rebecca Nurse undergoes a long imprisonment, especially arduous to a woman of her advanced age. Despite being revered throughout Salem as a ‘pious’ (62) woman who has lived a life of ‘good prayer’, (62) Rebecca Nurse is eventually hanged for witchcraft. Giles Corey is another heroic character. He is pressed to death with large stones – by any standards a horrific death – rather than name his ‘accomplices’ in witchcraft. His last words, ‘more weight’, (118) show his ‘fearsome’ (118) courage and heroism. These characters embody heroism and show, by contrast, the true evil of others.

Abigail Williams personifies evil through her actions. It is Abigail, through dancing in the woods and drinking a ‘charm to kill Goody Proctor’, (26) who initially spreads the fear of witchcraft in Salem; and it is Abigail who is directly or indirectly responsible for almost all of the accusations and hangings. Abigail uses the witch trials to accuse Elizabeth Proctor, a Godly, upstanding woman, hoping to see her hanged and ‘take (her) place’ (60) as John’s wife. If Elizabeth is out of the way, she reasons, John will turn to her again. It was Elizabeth who ‘put (her) out’, not John - he ‘loved (her) then and (does) now’. (28) Abigail, blinded by lust, cannot see that John ‘will cut off (his) hand before (he’ll) ever reach for her again.’ (29). As the trials progress, Abigail becomes seduced by power and her accusations grow more and more reckless, to the point where she threatens even Judge Danforth, telling him that even he is not immune to ‘the power of Hell.’ (96) Throughout the play Abigail shows no sign of either conscience or remorse. When public sentiment eventually turns against her Abigail does not repent. Instead she steals 31 pounds from her uncle, leaving him ‘penniless’ (111), and flees the town, destruction in her wake. Abigail is one of the true villains of the play.

The selfish intentions of Parris and the Putnams are also villainous. Parris, as the minister of Salem, should in theory be a moral guiding light for the village. However Parris is greedy, self-centred and focused far more on his social and material gain than on any noble goal. Parris shows his true colours right from the beginning, fearing not for his daughter’s life or sanity, but only that his ‘enemies will ruin’ him (18) if Betty’s illness is discovered. Throughout the trials he acts as lackey for Danforth, calling all defence an attempt to ‘overthrow the court’ (81). His greatest show of emotion during the course of play is entirely self-interested - upon realising that his niece has robbed and financially ruined him, for the first time he breaks down and weeps. The Putnams are similarly selfish characters; however, their selfish actions have tragic consequences. Thomas Putnam takes advantage of the witch trials to ‘(reach) out for land’, buying up the land forfeited from his neighbours convicted of witchcraft. He also callously uses his young daughter Ruth to achieve this end, prompting her to ‘cry witchery on George Jacobs’. (87) Ruth Putnam, made bitter and vindictive by the deaths of her babies, accuses Rebecca Nurse of the ‘marvellous and supernatural murder’ (67) of these babies. As a result, Rebecca Nurse, a woman who is the ‘very brick and mortar of the church’ in Salem, (67) is convicted of and hanged for witchcraft. These three characters emobody greed, selfishness and true villainy.

Neither hero nor villain, John Proctor is a flawed character who represents human failings. His affair with Abigail is arguably what sets the witch trials in motion, and yet his refusal to plead guilty to the charge of witchcraft, and his death as a martyr, is part of what ultimately ends the madness. John’s affair with Abigail is inexcusable; he betrays his wife and leaves a vulnerable young woman ‘waitin’ for (him) every night’. (28) As a direct result of this affair Abigail accuses John’s wife, among many others, of witchcraft. Although John has repented of and repudiated his adultery, the consequences cannot be ignored, and eventually he too is accused. This is the point at which John Proctor redeems himself, rising above his human failings. He refuses to plead guilty to witchcraft or accuse his friends, crying that, although his soul is lost, he ‘cannot live without (his) name’ (124) and will not give in. Despite his human failings, John Proctor dies a hero’s death.